

The Setting of Asian America in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *No-No Boy*

In both *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, by Jade Snow Wong, and *No-No Boy*, by John Okada, the portrayal of their different settings of Asian-America is pivotal to the authors' notions of racial and cultural identity. While Wong's depiction of Mills College conceives individual Asian-American identity as a choice of convenient positioning, Okada's description of the alleyway containing the entrance to Club Oriental reflects on the impossibility of feeling whole in one's membership as an Asian-American and gestures toward the slight hope held in fragmentation.

After a lengthy struggle with her parents' strict Chinese values, Jade Snow Wong attends Mills College as a stepping stone toward realizing her individual success in America. In her description of the Mills campus, Wong delineates the skills necessary to balance a Chinese familial identity with American cultural assimilation.

“She chose Mills Hall, a large, colonial structure still standing from the first Mills days of ninety years ago. This building housed over a hundred girls, and its kitchen staff was entirely Chinese, some of them descendants of the first Chinese kitchen help who worked for the founders of the college. In this hall, conveniently located between Kapiolani and the administration building and library, Jade Snow found her new friends” (157).

Wong notes that she “chose Mills Hall” to be her residential college, “conveniently located between Kapiolani,” her campus residence, “and the administration building and library.” Additionally, Wong continues the intentional compression of plot within her auto-biographical novel, privileging mentions of food in relation to Chinese-Americans and generational identity. Throughout *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Wong dedicates huge amounts of time to providing careful

details, almost recipes, for the preparation, serving, and eating of Chinese food. It is no surprise, therefore, that Wong mentions that even in her American college, the “kitchen staff was entirely Chinese, some of them descendants of the first Chinese kitchen help who worked for the founders of the college.” The emphasis on the generational nature of the Chinese-American kitchen help also serves as a subtle reminder that although Mills is where “Jade Snow [finds] her new friends,” the support of her Chinese-American family is ever present. Through the use of her careful choice of words and privileging of certain details in her description of Mills College, Wong conceives her individual identity as a choice of “convenient positioning” between the old and new, Asian and American, and family ties and new friends.

In *No-No Boy*, Okada’s depiction of the entrance to Club Oriental also attempts to grapple with Asian-American cultural identity, albeit less neatly. Struggling to come up with a definition of Asian-America, Okada resorts to exploring ideas of in and out, part and whole, and membership.

“They walked down the ugly street with the ugly buildings among the ugly people which was a part of America, and at the same time, would never be wholly America. The night was cool and dark. Halfway down an alley, among the forlorn stairways and innumerable trash cans, was the entrance to Club Oriental. It was a bottle club, supposedly for members only, but its membership consisted of an ever growing clientele.” (66)

Unlike the grandeur and hope conjured up in Wong’s description of “a large, colonial structure still standing from... ninety years ago,” the setting Okada chooses to depict Asian-America is unappealing, commonplace, and carries a sense of limitations. Okada repeats the word “ugly” three times in his description of what makes up “a part of America;” “the ugly street with the ugly buildings among the ugly people” create a sense of disagreeableness in the

very formation of an Asian-American identity. Melancholy seeps through in the mentions of the “cool and dark” night, as well as in the “forlorn stairways and innumerable trash cans” that litter the alleyway leading to Club Oriental.

This unpleasant, melancholic feeling lingers at “the entrance to Club Oriental” as the questions of parts and wholes interact with conceptions of ins and outs. Okada’s alley is “a part of America” but not “wholly America,” while Ichiro stands at the entrance to a club, “supposedly for members only.” Through the description of this setting, Okada assembles individual Asian-American identity as fragmented questions, impossible to answer. Evoking the possibility of a membership “in” to a club of cultural identity or a sense of wholeness to the splintered parts of Asian-America, the slightest sense of hope lingers in the fact that Club Oriental’s “membership consist[s] of an ever growing clientele.” Perhaps Ichiro could one day become a part of the club and form a sense of whole identity; however, the name of the club underscores the impossibility of this hope. Only Club Oriental, not Club America, could be possibly looking for members such as Ichiro.

Okada’s sense of Asian-American identity as fragmented parts ultimately cements itself through Ichiro’s action of “walk[ing]” through the streets. Reminiscent of both the beginning and end of the novel, Okada presents Ichiro on the street, walking in the darkness while chasing a tiny bit of America. Despite the dejected, ugly tone held in this passage, this very action of walking gestures toward a Japanese-American identity that can somehow continue in its fragmentation while also being held together to fill a previous dark emptiness.

Ultimately, the settings of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *No-No Boy* work to create distinct formations of Asian-American identity held under a shared Asian-American sensibility. Both Wong and Okada attempt to reconcile Asian with American, connecting the concepts through

their so-called cognitive mappings of totality, the endeavor to make sense of a larger cultural setting and identity in the depiction of a localized milieu.